

LANGUAGE LEARNING IN CONTENT-BASED ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

The recent introduction of content-based instruction (CBI) in Malaysian schools is increasingly seen as a methodology to develop students' English language proficiency. This study presents findings from two content-based language classrooms in a Malaysian school. The study seeks to determine to what extent negative feedback and teachers' feedback focused on form were made available to the students. Feedback focused on form is considered essential for Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Long & Robinson, 1998). Subjects for this study were two teachers and their 80 students from ESL classrooms where literature was used as content in teaching English. Audio-tape of teacher-student interaction was used to determine the extent to which such feedback was available to learners. Results of the study show that the teachers provided negative feedback and feedback focused on form consistent with theoretical claims made in SLA. However, the negative feedback and feedback focused on form provided by the teachers were minimal compared to feedback on content. Results of the study suggest that the teachers need to focus more on form, particularly syntactic forms, when providing feedback.

Content-based instruction is increasingly used as a methodology to develop students' language proficiency in schools and institutions of higher learning throughout the world. This methodology brings together subject-matter learning and content learning. It refers specifically to "the concurrent study of language and subject-matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material." (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989, p. vii)

A major premise of this approach is that content and language should be taught together for effective language learning. Krashen (1981) posits that second language is most successfully acquired when there is sufficient opportunity to engage in meaningful use of that language in a relatively-free environment. For Krashen (1991), subject matter language teaching, when the subject matter is comprehensible, is language teaching. Based on this, it has been argued that content classes provide learners with naturally meaningful input (Brinton et al., 1989; Crandall, 1993).

Content-based language teaching was introduced in Malaysian secondary schools in 2000. In this programme twenty-percent of class time in a week is to the teaching of English through literature.

One of the claims that have been made with regard to SLA is that learners need to be provided with negative feedback and feedback focused on form. The purpose of this study was to investigate to what extent learners were provided with negative feedback and feedback focused on form which have been claimed to be necessary for Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Negative feedback and feedback focused on form as a condition for SLA

One of the theoretical conditions claimed to be necessary for SLA is referred to as "negative input" or "feedback". The terms "negative data," "negative input," "negative evidence," and "negative feedback" have often been used interchangeably. The term "error correction", has also been used interchangeably with these terms with respect to classroom settings.

According to Schachter (1986), negative input is important for language learning because it provides metalinguistic information which shows the learner that "her utterance was in some way insufficient, deviant, unacceptable, or not understandable to the native speaker" (p.215). Examples of metalinguistic information are explicit corrections, confirmation checks and clarification requests.

Negative feedback is considered theoretically relevant for SLA as it is considered essential to hypothesis testing (Schachter, 1991). Language learning is viewed as a process of hypothesis testing, where language learners are constantly formulating and testing new hypotheses and rejecting old ones based on new data. In this perspective, errors are considered crucial to the language learning process as they inform us about some of the hypotheses that learners are formulating.

Empirical support for negative feedback has come from a number of studies (e.g., Carroll & Swain, 1993; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Lightbown, 1991; Herron & Tomasello, 1988). Studies by Herron and Tomasello (1988) suggest some positive effects of certain techniques of negative feedback. Observational studies by Lightbown and Spada (1990) and Lightbown (1991) also show positive effects for corrective feedback, and form-focused instruction. Carroll and Swain (1993) investigated the relative effects of explicit and implicit forms of feedback to determine the extent to which more explicit types of feedback are more helpful in learning grammatical generalizations.

Recent studies have suggested that attention to linguistic forms within the context of communicative language teaching can help learners in two ways. One is by improving their performance in processing input and the other, by increasing their accuracy in production. Incorporating attention to linguistic forms in this way has been termed *focus on form* (Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998).

Focus on form, as defined by Long and Robinson (1998, p.23), is "an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features-by the teacher and/or one or more students-triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production." Long (1996) was of the opinion that classroom instruction that incorporates focus on form has, among others, the advantage of providing negative evidence by means of direct or indirect negative feedback. This is in contrast to instruction that is purely meaning-oriented in which such focus generally does not occur.

Research on content-based instruction

This section will briefly reviews research on content-based instruction. Empirical support for CBI has emerged from different works. One of the most carefully studied content-based courses is the sheltered course at the University of Ottawa (Edwards, Wesche, Krashen, Clement & Kriudnier, 1984). This study confirmed that even in the absence of formal language instruction adult students can indeed gain in second-language proficiency when the second language is used as the medium of instruction and the input is made comprehensible. A three-year replication study (Hauptman, Wesche & Ready, 1988) also indicated that students in the sheltered Psychology classes mastered Psychology at least as well as did first-language control students. Students in both the studies showed gains in both the subject matter and second language skills equal to or better than comparison groups taking Psychology in their first language and students in regular French and English second language classes. Further evidence for the success of CBI is also shown in other studies (Lafayette & Buscaglia, 1985; Peck, 1984; Buch de Bagheeta, 1978; Ho, 1982; Sternfield, 1989).

Theoretical and empirical concerns

Some theoretical and empirical concerns have been expressed with respect to language learning in the context of content-based instruction. One concern is that the activities used in the classrooms may not be sufficient to achieve the level of structural and sociolinguistic accuracy required for the learners' communicative competence (Pica, 1995). In a large-scale, descriptive study in communicative programs in Canada, Lightbown and Spada (1990) found that although learners develop high levels of fluency and communicative ability in their target language, they still have problems with linguistic accuracy and complexity.

One major assumption made about content teaching is that language learning will be enhanced. However, Swain (1991), on the basis of data she and others collected from immersion classes, suggests that not all content teaching is necessarily good language teaching and points out several problems. Firstly, the focus in such classes is entirely meaning oriented. This was the condition Krashen (1982) stipulated for second language acquisition. However, Swain (1991) argues that if students are to actually acquire a second language by 'going for meaning' they will have to focus on the form of the utterance as it is used to express the meaning they are extracting. Secondly, because the main focus is on meaning, teachers frequently provide learners with inconsistent and possibly unsystematic information about grammatical features of their target language. Finally, the input students receive may be functionally restricted, that is, the full functional range of the linguistic item of focus is not used, or is infrequently used. This occurs as the linguistic item of focus is dependent on the content focus. For example, if the content focuses on markers of past time, as in history, the present tense may occur only infrequently or not occur at all.

Another limitation of content teaching that has been pointed out by researchers is in the nature of feedback learners receive on their own attempts to communicate. It has been found that in such classes, many grammatical errors go uncorrected as teachers respond to the content of the learners' utterances rather than to their errors in grammar. Allen, Swain, Harley and Cummins (1990) found that only 19 per cent of the total errors observed in their study were corrected.

SLA and the Content Classroom

Research in SLA has shown that provision of comprehensible input alone is not sufficient. Learners' need to be provided with negative feedback and feedback focused on form. Do content classrooms provide negative feedback and form-focused feedback. In this section we will examine whether or not, based on what has been revealed by research on content classrooms, the content classrooms meet these conditions.

Current theoretical and empirical work on SLA suggests that, though communication and content learning make an important contribution as activities for language use, they cannot also be seen as processes for language learning (Pica, 1995). Emphasis placed on facilitating and insuring communication and content learning in the classroom may not leave sufficient room for language learning itself, or on the cognitive processes considered essential for language learning. The importance of these cognitive processes has been reflected in numerous writings seen in constructs such as "consciousness raising" (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985), "focus on form" (Doughty, 1991; Long, 1991, 1996) and "notice the gap" (Schmidt & Frota, 1986). These processes have also been reflected in inputs that have been identified such as "enhanced input," and "negative input."

The Research Question and Hypothesis

The research findings from the content classrooms discussed above have shown that these classrooms seemed to lack conditions considered essential for language learning (Allen et al., 1990; Pica, 1995; Swain, 1985, 1991). Teacher feedback seemed to be lacking in these classrooms (Allen et al., 1990; Swain, 1991). Even though it has been claimed that comprehensible input is available in 'sufficient' quantities in content classrooms, research has shown that this input may be deficient in several important ways (Swain, 1991). As already discussed, firstly, the focus of the input was entirely meaning-oriented. Secondly, it was functionally restricted, and thirdly, teachers were providing inconsistent and unsystematic information about target language use (Swain, 1991). It was also found that, in such classes, many grammatical errors went uncorrected. Content classrooms may also be presenting a cognitive overload on the language learning process (Pica, 1995). As a result of all of the above problems, students may not be emerging from these classrooms with sufficient control of L2.

There is essentially one main motivation for the present research. Most of the work that has been done has used an outcomes-oriented methodology, and has not looked at the classroom in terms of the kinds of interactional conditions claimed theoretically to be central to SLA (Buch & de Bagheeta, 1978; Edwards et al., 1984; Hauptman et al., 1988; Ho, 1982a, b; Lafayette & Buscaglia, 1985; Milk, 1990; Mohan, 1986; Snow & Brinton, 1988; Sternfeld, 1989). Among the works cited above, only those done in Canadian immersion programs looked at the interactional conditions (Swain 1985, 1991; Allen et al., 1990). There does not seem to be any research, in terms of the interactional conditions on CBI in Malaysia.

The following research question was asked:

To what extent do teachers provide negative feedback and feedback focused on form during their interaction with their students?

The studies cited above suggest the following hypothesis about the availability of negative feedback and feedback focused on form in the content classroom. A discussion of the motivation for the hypothesis follows the hypothesis. The focus of the study was on teachers in teacher-student interaction. It was decided to focus on teachers as they are an important factor in classroom interaction. In addition to teaching, the main role of language teachers is often considered to be one of providing feedback and input. What teachers say has an important effect on student learning. Similarly, whether students have access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning or negative feedback focused on content is also likely to depend on which of these two aspects teachers focus on. These reasons led me to focus on the teacher in my study.

Content classrooms would provide less access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning than access to negative feedback focused on content.

The hypothesis was motivated by one of the assumptions made in content-based instruction, i.e., that it will be meaning-oriented. Based on this assumption, teachers are less likely to provide negative feedback on linguistic forms. This hypothesis was also based on data from French immersion studies which indicated that there was little teacher correction (Allen et al., 1990; Swain, 1990) and many grammatical errors went uncorrected as teachers responded more to the content of the learners' utterances than to their errors in grammar (Allen et al., 1990). Thus, based on the above, it was predicted that content classrooms would provide less access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning than access to negative feedback focused on content.

Participants

The participants in this study were two teachers and their 80 students from literature-based content classes at a secondary school in Malaysia. The teachers possessed bachelors degrees in English and Diploma in Education in the teaching of English as a Second Language.

Activities

Data for the study came from two literature-based ESL classes, both at the intermediate level. These classes are taught as part of the English Literature component for the Secondary English Language Programme. In these classes students were exposed to Asian, Australian and American texts. They were also exposed to translations of Malaysian and French works and simplified English classics. The main activities of the classes were class discussions, group work, pair work and in-class presentations. The students read and responded to these texts in the classes.

Data Collection, Coding and Analysis

Data for the study were collected over a eight-week period from both the classes. In both the classes, teacher-directed discussion of the texts was the main classroom activity during the observation period. Teacher-directed discussion was therefore chosen to address the research question. The data on teacher-student interactions were collected using a mini tape recorder.

The amount of negative feedback teachers provided to students to access feedback focused on L2 form and meaning, and the amount of negative feedback they provided to students to access feedback focused on content were measured by coding for all teacher utterances of negative feedback that responded to errors of linguistic form in student utterances and utterances of negative feedback that responded to errors of content in student utterances. This could reveal the extent to which the former was provided compared to the latter.

The audiotaped teacher-student interaction was coded by the researcher assisted by a university graduate. The assistant coder was given the definitions of the coding categories. The researcher then discussed the transcribed data with the assistant to ensure that he understood the definitions of the coding categories. The entire set of data was then coded by the researcher and the assistant using the categories set out for the study.

To ensure the reliability of coding of data, the researcher took a random sample of each of the categories used in the hypothesis and coded them with his assistant. They counted the frequency of occurrence of the above categories. The inter-rater reliability for categories was computed. The overall inter-rater reliability was 88. This figure was considered to be at a satisfactory level. After the inter-rater reliability was established, the entire set of transcription was coded separately by the researcher and the coder.

Negative feedback to students in this study refers to utterances which indicate a response to what is perceived to be a syntactical, lexical, or content error by the speaker in which another item which includes linguistic or content material not included in the speaker's utterance is supplied (Chun, Day, Chenoweth, and Luppescu, 1982). As in Chaudron (1986), errors made by students were identified according to two basic criteria, and were classified according to two types of error. The two criteria were:

- (1) an objective evaluation of linguistic or content errors according to linguistic norms or evident misconstrual of facts; and
- (2) any additional linguistic or other behavior that the teachers reacted to negatively or with an indication that improvement of the response was expected (p.67).

All student error utterances and the error utterances to which the teacher provided negative feedback were noted so that the proportion of negative feedback utterances could be determined. All student error utterances were identified and categorized into two types: linguistic form (syntactic and lexical) and content. Then teacher's negative feedback utterances were identified and categorized into negative feedback on linguistic form and on content. The teacher's simultaneous negative feedback utterances on both students' linguistic form and content errors were also noted and assigned to the respective categories.

The following coding categories were used in this hypothesis: (1) error utterances on linguistic form; and (2) error utterances on content. Error utterances on linguistic form were divided into two subcategories: (1a) Syntactic; and (1b) Lexical. The types, features, and examples of these categories are presented in table 1 below:

Table 1
Types, Features, and Examples of Error Utterances on
Linguistic Form and Content

| Types | Features | Examples |
|--|---|--|
| Error utterance on linguistic form | This category included the common error of syntax : tense, agreement, morphology, and word order. | Example 1: T: How many angles are there in a triangle? NNS: There are three <i>angle</i> . T: Yes, there are three <i>angles</i> in a triangle. |
| a) Syntactic error | | |
| b) Lexical error utterance | This category included the incorrect choice or addition of a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, question word and all other types of function words (Chun, Day, Chenoweth, and Lupescu 1982). | Example 2: NNS: The education systems in my country and in America are <i>same pattern</i> . T: You mean the education systems are <i>similar</i> ? NNS: Oh yeah. |
| Content error utterance | This category consisted of errors in the subject matter, message, meaning, or the truth value. These errors consist of those for which student responses show incomplete (e.g., a student's failure to state the units of measurement in Physical Science or Mathematics) or incorrect expression of the concepts relevant to the subject. Content errors may also simply be inappropriate answers that do not supply the information expected in the teacher's question (Chaudron 1986). | Example 3: T: If the length of a rectangle is 8 inches and the width is 4 inches, what is the area of the rectangle? NNS: Thirty-two inches. T: You have multiplied the two numbers correctly but you have to state the units of area correctly. It should be thirty-two <i>square</i> inches. |
| Error utterance on linguistic form and content | This category included both the features included in the linguistic and content error utterances above. | Example 4: T: If the length of a rectangle is 8 inches and the width is 4 inches, what is the area of the rectangle? NNS: Thirty-two inch. T: You have multiplied the numbers correctly but the answer should be thirty-two <i>square inches</i> . |

Example 1 is an illustration of a negative feedback utterance by the teacher on a syntactic error made by the student. Here the student made a syntactic error by saying 'three angle' and the teacher provides negative feedback on the student's error by saying '...three angles'.

Example 2 is an illustration of a teacher's negative feedback utterance on a lexical error made by a student. In this example the teacher asked whether by 'same pattern' the student meant 'similar'. The student then confirmed the teacher's negative feedback. In this way the teacher provided negative feedback on the lexical error of the student.

Example 3 illustrates a teacher's negative feedback utterance on a student's content error. In his answer the student failed to state the correct unit of measurement for area and the teacher provided explicit negative feedback on this error by saying 'It should be thirty-two square inches.'

Example 4 illustrates a teacher's negative feedback utterance on both linguistic form and content errors made by a student. The teacher not only corrected the error in content by stating that there should be a 'square' for area, but also corrected the error in linguistic form by stating that it should be 'inches' and not 'inch'.

The above categories on linguistic form (syntactical and lexical) were chosen because the extent of negative feedback in these categories by the teacher would indicate the extent to which the teacher was providing negative feedback on form to the students. These categories have also been used in previous studies (Chaudron, 1986; Chun et al., 1982; Pica & Doughty, 1985).

Hypothesis Testing and Data Analysis

The hypothesis was tested by counting and comparing teacher's utterances of negative feedback that responded to students' linguistic form error utterances to teacher's utterances of negative feedback that responded to students' content error utterances by firstly, computing the frequencies of error utterances made by students. These error utterances were classified according to whether they were error utterances on linguistic form (syntactic and lexical) or error utterances on content. Then frequencies of negative feedback utterances provided by the teacher were also computed. These utterances were again classified according to whether they were negative feedback utterances on linguistic form or negative feedback utterances on content. The proportion of negative feedback utterances on linguistic form was computed by dividing the total number of negative feedback utterances on linguistic form by the total number of students' error utterances on linguistic form

$$\text{i.e. Proportion of negative feedback utterances on linguistic form} = \frac{\text{Total number of negative feedback utterances that responded to student errors of linguistic form}}{\text{Total number of students' error utterances on linguistic form}}$$

Similarly, the proportion of negative feedback utterances on content was computed by dividing the total number of negative feedback utterances on content by the total number of students' content error utterances.

$$\text{i.e. Proportion of negative feedback utterances on content} = \frac{\text{Total number of negative feedback utterances that responded to student errors of content}}{\text{Total number of students' error utterances of content}}$$

These two proportions were converted to percentages and were used to test the hypothesis that teachers' negative feedback to students focused more on the content than the form of their utterances.

Results

The hypothesis predicted that content classrooms would provide less access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning than access to negative feedback focused on content. This hypothesis was tested by counting and comparing the teachers' negative feedback utterances in response to students' linguistic form and content error utterances across the three classes.

The hypothesis was supported by the data from the two classes studied. As had been predicted, the classrooms provided less access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning than access to negative feedback focused on content. The differences observed in the teachers' utterances of negative feedback that responded to students' error utterances in content and their utterances of negative feedback that responded to students' error utterances in linguistic form were significant in the classes: Class A ($X^2 = 16.33$, $df=1$, $p<.05$); Class B ($X^2 = 8.70$, $df=1$, $p<.05$)

The following two sets of excerpts from the classes illustrate how the teacher provided negative feedback utterances in response to errors of linguistic form and utterances in response to errors in content in student utterances:

EXCERPT 1

T: We go back to our lesson, right?

S: Yes.

T: The other day you've learned about two stanzas already, okay.

SS: Yes, yes.

T: And I think that you've got the main idea of what the poem is all about ah ah ah is an advice.

S: *The father of his son.*

T: *From father to his son*, okay, advice *from father to his son*, about what?

S: About life.

T: About life. Now what is it that he wants to advise his son? Is life difficult?

Ss: No.

Ss: Yes.

T: Okay some say no, some say yes.

EXCERPT 2

T: How about Coyotito? What do you know about Coyotito?

S: Baby.

T: He is a baby or you can say infant I-N-F-A-N-T (spelled the word) Infant is a baby. Why is he called Coyotito? Why is he called Coyotito?

S: He cry.

T: Yes, he *cries*, because he likes to cry and when he cries he sounds like a Coyote okay. Coyotite has a loud shriek.

EXCERPT 3

T: He is a missionary. You know what is a missionary, you learned history, right? What is a missionary?

S: Coloniser.

T: Coloniser? No.

S: Traveler.

T: A traveler, he comes to another place and then he brings with him what kind of religion? What religion?

S: *Christian*.

T: Christianity. So those people are missionary ah okay. So the name of the missionary was...

The above excerpts illustrate the correction of errors in linguistic form of the students. The italicized words in the utterances show the errors in linguistic form and the correction of the error respectively.

The following excerpt illustrates the teacher's correction of student's content error:

T: What is another virtue, another value?

S: Truthful

T: Truthful? No that was not the value, the virtue we're talking about.

S: Patient.

T: It's patience. Anything else?

S: Trust yourself, trust yourself.

The above excerpt shows the correction of content error by the teacher. In response to the teacher's question, 'What is another virtue, another value?' the student answers 'Truthful,' which is an error in content. The teacher responds with a confirmation check 'Truthful?' which elicits the correct response, 'Patient', from the student.

The results for the hypothesis are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 shows the frequency of student content error utterances, teacher utterances of negative feedback on content, student linguistic form error utterances, teacher utterances of negative feedback on linguistic form, and the percentage of utterances of negative feedback on content and the percentage of utterances of negative feedback on linguistic form provided by the teacher. Out of a total of 40 error utterances in content of the students, the teacher provided 38, or 38/40 (95%), utterances of negative feedback on content, while out of a total of 80 linguistic form error utterances of the students, the teacher provided 10, or 10/80 (13%), utterances of negative feedback on linguistic form.

Table 2
Frequency and Percentage of Students' Content and Linguistic Form Error Utterances and Teacher's Utterances of Negative Feedback on Content and Linguistic Form in Class A

| | Student Error Utterances | Teacher Feedback Utterances to Students' Error Utterances | % of Teacher Feedback Utterances/ Student Error Utterances |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Content | 40 | 38 | 38/40= 95% |
| Linguistic Form | 80 | 10 | 10/80 = 13% |
| X ² =16.33, df=1, p<.05 | | | |

Table 3 shows the frequency of student content error utterances, teacher utterances of negative feedback on content, student linguistic form error utterances, teacher utterances of negative feedback on linguistic form, and the percentage of utterances of negative feedback on content and the percentage of utterances of negative feedback on linguistic form provided by the teacher. Out of a total of 35 content error utterances of the students, the teacher provided 30 or 30/35(86%) utterances of negative feedback on content, while out of a total of 80 linguistic form error utterances of the students, the teacher provided 14 or 14/80 (18%) utterances of negative feedback on linguistic form.

Table 3

Frequency and Percentage of Students' Content and Linguistic Form Errors, and Teacher's Utterances of Negative Feedback on Content and Linguistic Form in Class B

| | Student Error Utterances | Teacher Feedback Utterances to Students' Error Utterances | % of Teacher Feedback Utterances/ Student Error Utterances |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|---|--|
| Content | 35 | 30 | 30/35 = 86% |
| Linguistic Form | 80 | 14 | 14/80 = 18% |
| $\chi^2=8.7$, $df=1$, $p<.05$ | | | |

The above results are summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 4

Teacher negative feedback utterances as a percentage of student error utterances

| | Class A | Class B |
|---|---------|---------|
| Teachers' negative feedback utterances on content | 95 | 86 |
| Teachers' negative feedback utterances on linguistic form | 13 | 18 |

Discussion of the Results

The hypothesis of the study predicted that content classrooms would provide less access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning than to negative feedback focused on content. The prediction made was supported by the data in both the classes studied. In class A, the teacher provided utterances of negative feedback for 95% of the errors in content of the students while he provided utterances of negative feedback for 13% of the errors in linguistic form. In class B, the percentages were 86% and 18% respectively.

A brief examination of the teacher's negative feedback utterances on students' errors of content and their errors of linguistic form, which are reflective of both the classes, will help to put the discussion in perspective. Almost all of the negative feedback utterances on errors of linguistic form were implicit while almost all of the negative feedback utterances on errors of content were explicit. The following excerpts illustrate the difference between the teacher's implicit correction of errors of linguistic form and explicit correction of errors of content. For example, the teacher in Class A used an implicit negative feedback focused on form in the excerpt below.

EXCERPT

T: How about Coyotito? What do you know about Coyotito?

S: Baby.

T: He is a baby or you can say infant I-N-F-A-N-T (spelled the word) Infant is a baby. Why is he called Coyotito? Why is he called Coyotito?

S: He cry.

T: Yes, he *cries*, because he likes to cry and when he cries he sounds like a Coyote okay. Coyotite has a loud shriek.

In the excerpt above the teacher made an implicit correction of the student's response 'He cry' to 'Yes, he cries'. This was evident from the teacher's linguistic correction of the student's response after which the teacher modified the word 'cry'.

In contrast, the teachers made use of explicit negative feedback for content as in the excerpt below.

T: What is another virtue, another value?

S: Truthful

T: Truthful? No that was not the value, the virtue we're talking about.

S: Patient.

T: It's patience. Anything else?

S: Trust yourself, trust yourself.

In the excerpt above, in response to the teacher's question 'What is another virtue, another value?' he received the following response from a student: 'Truthful'. He then provided explicit feedback on the student's response: 'Truthful? No, that was not the value, the virtue we're talking about.' The student responded by saying 'patient' which was the correct response from the point of view of content though it was an error from the point of view of form.

The implicit negative feedback on linguistic form suggested that the corrections the teacher provided on linguistic form might not have been intentional but might have occurred naturally as a result of a NS or proficient speaker's feedback to NNSs. This could have occurred in any communication setting. This type of negative feedback on linguistic form occurred in the two classes investigated. It can be inferred from this that even in situations where negative feedback on linguistic form appeared, the teachers' main preoccupation was with content and might not have been on form. When this preoccupation with content is taken into consideration even in what appeared as focus on linguistic form, the frequency of utterances on linguistic form obtained in the two classes must be considered as an overrepresentation of the teachers' deliberate focus on linguistic form.

There might be several reasons as to why the teachers provided fewer utterances of negative feedback that responded to errors of linguistic form in student utterances than utterances of negative feedback that responded to errors of content in student utterances. One reason might be that a focus on language could distract students from ideas in the text. According to the teachers, the main objective of the lesson was to use literature lessons to build the students' communicative ability and creative expression.

A closer examination of most of the utterances of negative feedback on students' errors in linguistic form showed that they focused on vocabulary closely related to key ideas in literature. So what looked like negative feedback utterances were used by the teacher to ensure understanding of the content.

The data revealed several possible reasons why the teachers provided overwhelming correction of errors of content of students and minimal corrections of errors of linguistic form. One possible reason could be the difficulty of teaching language when one was teaching content as these involved two different types of skills. Teaching language involved teaching skills which included correction of linguistic form, whereas the aim of teaching content, as in the case of literature, was to ensure that students understood the message and gave a personal response to the text. They might have thought that these were not compatible with each other. Secondly, the teachers might have thought that frequent correction of errors of linguistic form would disrupt the smooth flow of communication in the classroom taking students' attention away from content. Thirdly, the teachers might not have felt the need to focus on form as the content classes took only twenty percent of the time allocated for English and they still had eighty percent of the time in which they could focus on linguistic problems encountered by students. Finally, the teachers might have felt that their priority was to ensure that their students comprehended the material that they presented in their classes as this was tested in their examinations. Given the limited class time at their disposal and the need to ensure comprehension of material, they might have favoured focusing on content over linguistic form.

It is significant to note the frequent use of comprehension checks by the teachers. Comprehension checks are moves to establish whether the speaker's own preceding utterance has been understood by the addressee (Long & Sato, 1983). The frequent use of comprehension checks by the teachers, though not a focus of this research, is nevertheless useful as an indicator that the teachers were engaged primarily in establishing accurate content. In line with this need for accurate content and precise information, they frequently gave feedback on mistakes of content to ensure that their students had a proper understanding of the texts. They tended to ignore a majority of language errors except the very blatant ones.

Implications

The results of Chi-square tests on the frequency data for the classes showed that the teachers provided input to students in ways claimed to assist SLA, i.e., they provided students access to negative feedback focused on L2 form and meaning. However, the amount of such negative feedback, was negligible compared negative feedback focused on content. The teachers' negative feedback were characterized by utterances that focused on the content of the classroom rather than on the linguistic form. Given the responsibility to be both content and language teachers, the teachers' input suggest that they gave more attention to content and students' learning thereof than to language. However, the data from these classes also showed that these classes could be made more conducive for language learning, if shortcomings observed during classes are addressed, or conversely, if structures observed were promoted or developed. These shortcomings will be discussed in the context of implications of the study for ESL classroom practice.

The results of the present study have shown that the teachers focused significantly on content when providing feedback to their students. This focus was mainly concentrated on meaning comprehension. In other words, there was far less frequent focus on form-meaning relationships. As has already been noted earlier, focus on meaning comprehension is consistent with Krashen's theoretical position (1984) on input and interaction needs of L2 students (1984). In his view, the key to the success of content based instruction was due to the provision of 'comprehensible input,' which he saw as "the only true cause of second language acquisition" (Krashen, 1984, p.67). However, this has been shown to be insufficient for SLA. Teachers' negative feedback and feedback focused on linguistic forms to students have also been shown to be necessary for SLA (Long & Robinson, 1988; Schachter, 1984; Swain, 1985).

The results of the present study showed that there was overwhelming focus on content with a concentration on meaning comprehension. Yet, according to SLA theory, what students needed was to be able to focus on relationships of form and meaning relationships in the language they were learning. How could this be achieved in the sheltered classrooms? One way of encouraging this would be for the teachers to highlight these relationships in their input and feedback to their students.

Following Lightbown's approach (1998), teachers could teach the learners explicitly the L2 forms to which they will draw the learners' attention whenever difficulties in using them during communicative tasks arise. In this approach, learners are alerted to the devices that will be used later to draw their attention to formal errors.

Doughty and Varela (1998) used an approach for drawing learner attention to error that could also be used by the teachers to bring about form and meaning relationships. The teacher in their study provided negative evidence in two phases, which they termed corrective feedback. In the first phase, the teacher provided repetitions to draw learner attention. This was followed by the second phase in which the teacher provided recasts to provide the contrastive L2 forms. The following example, taken from Doughty et al. (1998), illustrates the use of corrective recasting.

Jose: I think that the worm will go under the soil.
 Teacher: I *think* that the worm *will* go under the soil?
 Jose: (no response)
 Teacher: I *thought* that the worm *would* go under the soil
 Jose: I *thought* that the worm *would* go under the soil

In the above example, the teacher repeated the errors 'think' and 'will' with rising intonation before recasting the learner utterance into targetlike forms. In some instances, the teacher in their study repeated a phrase containing an incorrect past verb, placing the verb in focus by using stress and intonation to attract the student's attention to the nontargetlike form. The teacher then used recasts when the student did not attempt any past time reference at all.

In a study on corrective feedback, and responses to feedback, which the researchers called 'learner uptake', Lyster and Ranta (1977) found that the feedback types most likely to result in learner responses, besides clarification requests and repetition, were elicitation and metalinguistic feedback. Therefore, another approach teachers could use in their classrooms is by using metalinguistic feedback and elicitation techniques. The former is defined by Lyster et al. (1977) as "comments, information, or questions related to the well-formedness of the student's utterance, without explicitly providing the correct form." (p.47) The latter refers to techniques used by teachers to directly elicit the correct form from the students.

The results have also shown that while the focus on content was generally explicit, the focus on linguistic form was generally implicit. Without explicit focus on linguistic form students may not be able to focus attention on certain forms that are difficult to perceive from implicit feedback alone. Therefore, there is a need for explicit focus on linguistic form whenever the need arises in the course of teaching.

Given the demands on the teacher in terms of the need to focus on content and also on language, and the constraints on instructional time, it becomes imperative for the teacher to focus on forms that are needed by the students. How could this be accomplished in the classroom? As suggested by Doughty et al. (1998), the teacher could make a proactive stance on focus on form. This could be done by selecting in advance an aspect of the target form to focus on based on observations and analysis of students' interaction with the teacher in the class

The need for research in such classrooms has been indicated by researchers, such as Swain (1991) who, based on her massive data base of immersion classes, showed that good content teaching may not necessarily be good language teaching, and Pica (1995), who has argued that these classes may not afford opportunities for cognitive processes considered essential for language learning.

The findings seemed to indicate that teachers in these classes provided negative feedback and feedback focused on form consistent with claims made in SLA. However, it was apparent that the frequency of negative feedback and form-focused feedback were minimal when compared to their focus on content. The teachers' utterances were typically those characterized by an emphasis on content-specific information rather than on linguistic forms. Given the charge to be both content and language teachers, the teachers' feedback suggest that they gave more attention to content and students' learning thereof than to language.

There is one limitation to the present study and this is with respect to the sample size. This study investigated the utterances of only two content-based classes. A much larger sample is necessary to make this a more valid representation of content-based classrooms in general.

This investigation looked at the process of language learning in the context of content-based instruction. The study focused on teacher speech to determine whether classrooms provided a context for language learning from the point of view of negative feedback and form-focused instruction. It is suggested that more research be undertaken along the line adopted for this study so that there would be more evidence to determine the effectiveness of content-based instruction. It is also suggested that this line of research be extended to other models such as the theme-based, sheltered and adjunct models.

Most previous research compared the language outcomes in content-based instruction with traditional language teaching situations. This research adopted an interactional/process-oriented approach to detail the processes of language learning and to find out whether these processes provided a congenial climate for language learning. This approach should be continued in future research as this approach reveals information that may not be revealed through an outcomes-oriented approach.

As noted in the brief literature review, many studies have been undertaken in content-based instruction. However, most of the studies were in the context of French immersion programs in Canada and content classes in the U.S. Though the findings are generally relevant, the educational settings found in these two countries are different. In view of the different educational contexts in which content-based instruction is being implemented it is imperative to determine the effectiveness of content-based instruction in the context of ASEAN countries, in general, and in the Malaysian educational context, in particular, to gain better understanding of content-based instruction and SLA in these contexts.

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